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Nevadans band together to fight California Company's power plant

RENO, Nev. (AP) -- Two groups of Nevadans have formed to fight a San Diego-based company's plans to build a power plant near the scenic Black Rock Desert 100 miles north of Reno.

Don Asher, a business writer from Gerlach, has founded a group called "Keep California Pollution in California" to try to drum up opposition to Sempra Energy's plans.

The proposed Granite Fox project would be the largest coal-fired plant in Nevada and generate enough electricity for 1.5 million households.

Sempra touts the plant's economic benefits, saying it would create 100 permanent jobs and a windfall in property taxes to Washoe County.

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But Asher has invited experts to talk Monday night to Gerlach residents about how the small town at the southern tip of the Black Rock Desert can fight back.

Gerlach residents are fighting the project on grounds it will cause pollution, drain groundwater and destroy wildlife habitat.

"As soon as people find out anything about this they are dead set against it," Asher told the Reno Gazette-Journal. "Even Bruno (Selmi, the town's leading business owner) has to think about his grandkids."

Steve Chandler, a landscape photographer from Gerlach, has formed another group to oppose the project.

"(There's) the whole feeling of having a huge corporation barge its way in here and screw up our environment. They'll disrupt our lives and ruin the whole feeling of this area as well as pollute the air, the land and taking our water," Chandler said.

Sempra Energy officials contend the 1,450-megawatt power plant would be the "cleanest in the West." The company also plans to invest in geothermal and wind power stations to generate another 200 megawatts of power.

"This is not your father's coal plant," Sempra spokesman Art Larson said.

Sempra also plans to sell power to Reno-based Sierra Pacific Power Co., which could benefit customers with low-cost and reliable power.

Sempra is scheduled to host an open house Wednesday in Gerlach to field questions about the plant.

In a related development, conservationist David Rumsey is asking the state engineer to determine who owns water on the desert where the plant would be built.

Sempra officials have said they would need 16,000 acre-feet of water each year to cool the plant.

Rumsey, who is turning a 1,400-acre Gerlach-area ranch into a nature preserve, has hired San Francisco lawyer Michael Van Zandt to represent him on the filing.

"We feel it is utterly necessary, given the massive disruption of water in the Smoke Creek basin that their project would result in," Rumsey said.

Larson said the company was not prepared to say what impact the filing could have on plans to build the plant.

Sempra officials have said they could build a smaller plant, revert to more expensive dry-cooling equipment or not build the project at all if there's not enough water.